Disappointed Ontario has own climate plan in mind; Province argues it can fight emissions, protect economy at same time

The Toronto Star

March 26, 2021 Friday

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A6

Length: 674 words

Byline: Robert Benzie Queen's Park Bureau Chief

Body

It began with a decal debacle and it ended with a Supreme smackdown.

Premier Doug Ford has lost his $30-million war against the federal government's "carbon tax" after the Supreme Court decreed Ottawa can impose such measures on the provinces.

Thursday's ruling came 203 days after Ford's mandatory gas-pump stickers attacking carbon-pricing were deemed unconstitutional by the Ontario Superior Court of Justice following a Canadian Civil Liberties Association challenge.

A chastened Environment Minister Jeff Yurek told reporters at Queen's Park that "we're disappointed in the decision from the Supreme Court."

While Yurek conceded that "climate change is real," he said the Progressive Conservatives opposed the federal Liberals' program out of concerns for affordability.

"We want a strong climate plan. However ... we want to take a different path. We can move forward to protect our land, air and water and fight against climate change in a balanced matter, protecting the environment and the economy at the same time," he said.

Ontarians were subjected to the federal program after the Tories withdrew the province from its cap-and-trade alliance with Quebec and California following the 2018 election.

That carbon plan brought in $1.9 billion annually to the treasury, all of which was spent on environmental initiatives such as clean public transit, electric vehicle subsidies, and retrofitting homes and buildings.

But Yurek said the province would work with Ottawa to achieve Canada's greenhouse gas emission reduction targets.

"We will continue to implement our tough but fair plan, approved by the federal government, to hold large, industrial emitters accountable for their pollution," he said.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath railed against Ford for "waging a war on climate action, wasting Ontario's money to fight his basic obligation to try to leave our children and grandchildren with a livable world."

"Doug Ford wasted hundreds of millions of dollars ripping down wind farms and tearing electric vehicle charging stations out of the ground, and he wasted time and money on this court challenge," said Horwath.

"We only have two choices: the federal price on carbon, or a provincial climate plan that benefits the people of this province. Doug Ford chose the federal carbon tax," she said.

Liberal Leader Steven Del Duca said the premier "wasted millions to pander to his party's climate change deniers."

Del Duca, who was a minister in the provincial Liberal government that forged the cap-and-trade pact with Quebec and California, said the Tories were unlikely to ever win in the high court.

"Doug Ford's fight against the carbon tax was nothing more than a political power play at the taxpayers' expense," he said, recalling Justice Edward Morgan's ruling that compulsory gas-pump stickers violated business owners' freedom of expression.

The Liberal leader mocked "Ford's partisan anti-climate stickers," 25,000 of which were printed at a cost of $4,954 and were easily removed because of adhesive problems.

They were a high-profile element in a taxpayer-funded blitz that included slick TV commercials and the doomed joint court challenge with the governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

While $30 million was budgeted for the push, the Tories claim only $7 million was spent on legal fees, advertising, and other costs, though the government did not provide a detailed breakdown when asked.

Even before the decals were ruled unconstitutional, business groups were outraged at proposed fines of up to $10,000 a day for scofflaws refusing to display the Tory-blue stickers that read "the federal carbon tax will cost you."

Green Leader Mike Schreiner decried the public funds squandered "on partisan lawsuits, stickers that don't stick, and cancelling contracts."

"Even the auditor general has said that the government's made-to-fail environment plan will not reduce climate pollution," said Schreiner.

"Will the premier stop wasting our hard-earned tax dollars sabotaging climate solutions and actually start investing in urgent climate action?"

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: CLIMATE ACTION (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); EMISSIONS (90%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (90%); ENVIRONMENTAL LAW (90%); LAW COURTS & TRIBUNALS (90%); SUPREME COURTS (90%); CARBON TAX (89%); CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & TEENS (89%); EMISSIONS CREDITS (89%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (89%); POLITICAL PARTIES (89%); ELECTRIC MOBILITY (86%); ENVIRONMENTAL DEPARTMENTS (78%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (78%); HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS (78%); LIBERALISM (78%); NEGATIVE NEWS (78%); POLITICS (78%); TAXES & TAXATION (78%); AIR QUALITY REGULATION (77%); CONSERVATION (77%); DECISIONS & RULINGS (77%); ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION & POLICY (77%); ENVIRONMENTALISM (77%); GREENHOUSE GASES (77%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (77%); POLLUTION (77%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL

IMPACTS (77%); PRICES (76%); APPROVALS (72%); ELECTRIC VEHICLE INDUSTRY (69%); ELECTRIC VEHICLES (64%); GRANDCHILDREN (50%); TREATIES & AGREEMENTS (50%)

Industry: EMISSIONS (90%); CARBON TAX (89%); EMISSIONS CREDITS (89%); ELECTRIC MOBILITY (86%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (77%); WIND ENERGY (75%); ELECTRIC VEHICLE INDUSTRY (69%); ELECTRIC VEHICLES (64%)

Geographic: OTTAWA, ON, CANADA (88%); ONTARIO, CANADA (93%); CALIFORNIA, USA (92%); QUEBEC, CANADA (90%); CANADA (92%)

Load-Date: March 26, 2021

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